

Q&A: Water Supply in Washington: Update for the End of the Summer, 2006

Question:

It has not rained for some time, is our state's water supply OK?

Answer:

This is historically the time of year when rivers and streams are at their lowest and human demand for water is at its highest.

We were fortunate that we had an above average snow pack this past winter, which has really helped us through the summer. However, because we have had a dryer than normal summer and above normal summer temperatures, there are some areas of the state experiencing mild drought conditions and a few areas are worse off than others. This is to be expected and is fairly typical for this time of year.

Question:

Are we in a drought like last year?

Answer:

No. Mild drought and drought emergencies are not the same. While the state may be experiencing a mild drought, we are not at the level of declaring a statewide drought emergency. A drought emergency is defined as when conditions are causing undue hardship and where our rivers and streams are at less than 75% of normal.

However, some isolated areas of the state are experiencing drought emergency conditions, notably the northwest corner of the Olympic Peninsula where the Makah Nation is located. Their reservoir is critically low and the state is working to provide temporary relief to this community.

Question:

What is Ecology Doing?

Answer:

We are monitoring streams and rivers throughout the State. According to the USGS measurements, about half of Washington streams and rivers are at below normal levels for this time of year.

For rivers in Central, Eastern and even Western Washington that have flows set, it is not unusual that if flows drop to a certain level then junior water rights holders have to check with Ecology to see if they can use water. Currently junior water right holders on the Little Spokane River must check in with us before irrigating the rest of the summer.

In Central Washington, some irrigators on the Methow, Wenatchee and Okanogan rivers can be interrupted when streamflows are low. These orders go out every year. Irrigators with interruptible water rights have to call a stream flow hotline before they are allowed to irrigate. Orders went out in early August for the Methow and Okanogan and a few weeks ago on the Wenatchee.

Question:
What can I do?

Answer:

Citizens should pay attention to messages from local water suppliers for water supply conditions and whether or not there are any water restrictions in your community. Typically this time of year some areas are worse off than others and some areas may not experience any difficulties.

Regardless of the weather conditions, it is always wise to conserve precious water whenever possible. Here are some things you can do in your home:

- take shorter showers
- don't let the water run when you are shaving, brushing your teeth or hand washing dishes
- make sure you have a full load before starting a washing machine or dishwasher
- convert to water efficient toilets, faucets and showerheads.
- water your lawn early in the morning or later in the evening (or consider letting it go brown—it will turn green in a couple of months)
- consider converting to low water landscaping
- consider drip irrigation for plants, shrubs and trees
- limit the water use you use to approximately one inch per week, including rainfall. For best results, moisten the soil between four and six inches deep with each watering.
- check Ecology's website for more water conservation ideas.